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AUTHOR Gerardi, Steven John
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ABSTRACT

In 1970, the City University of New York (CUNY) adopted an open-admissions policy, under which any student with a high school degree has the right of access to CUNY community colleges. Subsequently, CUNY was faced with large numbers of students in need of basic skills instruction. By the end of the 1970's, the Freshman Skills Assessment Program (FSAP) was established university-wide to assess competencies in writing, mathematics, and reading. A study was conducted to compare the current freshman cohort with the first open-admissions cohort to determine whether there had been a significant decline in the educational outcomes of the student body at the community college level since the institution of the open-access policy. Two cohorts of students attending New York City Technical College were compared in terms of demographic measures, educational background, FSAP scores, and measures of college performance. The study revealed that over the 20-year period there has been a consistency in academic performance outcomes and educational background. Specific study findings included the following: (1) members of the first open-admissions cohort (the 1980 cohort) finished their first year of college with a 1.91 grade point average (GPA) and 16 earned credits, compared to the 1989 sample which earned a mean GPA of 1.88 and averaged 12 earned credits; (2) that portion of the 1980 freshman cohort that would have been admitted under previous admissions criteria (the "regular" cohort) finished their first year of study with a 2.49 GPA and 25 earned credits; (3) 25% of the 1980 cohort, 24% of the 1989 cohort, and 22% of the "regular" cohort did not return for the second year; (4) 74% of the 1980 cohort, 75% of the "regular" cohort, and 91% of the 1989 cohort reported that they were the first in their family to attend college; (5) 80% of the 1989 cohort, 43% of the 1980 cohort, and 40% of the "regular" cohort were either working or anticipated the need to work during the school year. (ECC)

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Open-Admissions: What has Changed in Two Decades at The Associates Degree Institutions of The City University of New York(CUNY) ?

Dr. Steven John Gerardi
New York City Technical College
of the City University of New York
300 Jay Street, Brooklyn, New York 11201
Human Services Department (718) 260-5059

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Open-Admissions: What has Changed in Two Decades At the Associates Degree Institutions of CUNY?

Abstract

In the twenty years since the City University of New York (CUNY) instituted an open-admissions policy, it was found that educational background and predictors of academic success among a sample of Freshman enrolled in Associate Degree programs have remained significantly consistent since CUNY embarked on a controversial open-admissions policy in 1970.

Open-Admissions: What has Changed in Two Decades At the Associates Degree Institutions of CUNY?

Introduction

Since its inception the City University of New York has played a large role in the education of New York City's poor and immigrant population. This tradition dating back one hundred and forty-three years, has been instrumental in assisting hundreds of thousands of CUNY graduates out of the grip of poverty (Gorelick, 1981).

CUNY at the undergraduate level, is a university consisting of 12 senior colleges, 4 community colleges and 1 Technical college campus system. Prior to 1970 the admissions standard was a minimum high school average of 87 to enter the senior colleges, and 75 to enter the community colleges. However, in the wake of the civil-rights and other equalitarian movements of the sixties, the City University under pressure to provide greater access to populations underrepresented at CUNY, in 1970 adopted an open-admissions policy, under which students have been admitted to the senior colleges with high school averages of 80 and above (within academic course work) or those in the top 50 percentile of their high school graduating class. All others with a high school degree have the right of access to the community colleges.

Since 1970 several educational and social factors have led to the notion of the "Closing American Mind" (Bloom, 1987) perception. Education within our nation's inner-cities has become increasingly problematic, and the New York City system is no

exception. The literature points to a variety of interrelated factors which have contributed to the difficulty of educating inner-city youth over the last two decades, such as economic impoverishment, poorly educated parents, unprecedented violence, the drug epidemic and the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

There is a long social-psychological tradition which concludes that such conditions create negative attitudes toward school, diminish educational achievement and contribute to the appallingly high drop-out rate among high school students in our nation's inner-cities. In New York City public school system 55% of the high school student population drop-out. However, the drop-out rate could be as much as 72% for minority populations (Task Force on New York State drop-out Problems, 1986); United States General Accounting Report-Congressional Report, 1987).

Additionally, even among those who are graduated from high school, employment opportunities in New York City are limited because of the rising educational credentials needed for entry into the desirable labor market. The traditional blue collar job market that was so bountiful in the early to mid-sixties in New York City has now dwindled to a mere shadow of itself today. Therefore, the value of the high school degree has declined. This devaluation has led many high school graduates who normally would not seek a college education because of enrollment in non-academic or vocational high school curricula, to do so now.

Thus, after the implementation of the open-admissions policy, CUNY was faced with large numbers of students in need or

perceived to be in need of instruction in the basic skills. By the end of the 1970's, the Freshmen Skills Assessment Program was established on a University-wide basis to assess competencies in writing, mathematics and reading. These examinations are required for all incoming freshmen in order to identify skill deficiencies. The CUNY Freshmen Skills Assessment Test in reading is a 45-item reading comprehension subject of the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS) (Educational Testing Service, 1978) (DTLS is also used nationally). The DTLS was specifically designed to identify students who may need special assistance in particular aspects of reading and language use before undertaking standard college level work. In addition to the reading comprehension subtest, the DTLS also includes tests in vocabulary, logical relationships, and usage.

The CUNY Mathematics Skills Assessment Test is a 40-item math and algebra test designed to identify students with math deficiencies. The mathematics test is a locally constructed test, which measures basic mathematical skills in whole numbers, fractions, decimals, percents, ratio and proportion, signed numbers, equations, Pythagorean Theorem, word problems and all forms of algebraic representations.

The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test, which was also locally constructed, consists of an essay type examination, in which a student must choose one of two topics. There are more than two dozen forms of this examination, all on argumentative topics at roughly the same level of difficulty. This examination

was also locally constructed. For the reading examination there are eight forms, and ten forms for the mathematics examination.

To date, there has not been a comparison study of the current Freshmen cohort and the first open-admissions cohort. Therefore, the focus of this work will be to ask the following question: has there been a significant decline in the educational outcomes of the student body at the community college level since CUNY instituted the open-admissions policy ?

This effort will employ a multiple data collection method to compare the 1989 Freshmen cohort and the first open-admissions cohort at New York City Technical College (City Tech).

Method

A multiple collection of the data was undertaken to compare the 1989 Freshmen with the first open-admissions community college cohort. This work will include data collected from the historical literature centering around educational backgrounds, academic outcomes of the open-admissions cohort and the cohort which would have been admitted to CUNY before the open-admissions policy was implemented. For comparative purposes, the data were collected from the official college records of this 1989 sample, and from a questionnaire which was administered to the 1989 Freshmen cohort.

Quantitative data: The quantitative data was placed into four categories: 1) demographic measures, which includes the

respondent's gender, ethnic background, family income, mother's educational attainment, father's educational attainment, respondent's sources of income, siblings attending or having attended college, and the respondent's reasons for attending college: 2) educational background such as the number of high school academic units taken, high school average, high school average in math and English: 3) scores on CUNY's standardized assessment examinations to include the respondent's CUNY math score, CUNY reading score and CUNY writing score: 4) measures of college performance, which include the respondent's GPA after two semesters, number of college credits earned over the two semester period and the students enrollment or persistence status after two semesters.

Data categories two (2),three (3) and four (4) were extracted from the college's official records. Category one (1) was extracted from a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in the Fall of 1989 to 500 freshmen students enrolled in the Freshmen Year Experience courses entitled Academic Access 101.

The instructors administered the questionnaire to their classes (on the first day of classes) at the beginning of the period and the questionnaires were collected after completion. Approximately 300 questionnaires were returned completed. This sample represents approximately 10% of the entering Freshmen class.

Historical Comparative Analysis: For comparison purposes this study used a ten year longitudinal study of the first entering class under open-admissions entitled Right Versus Privilege: The Open Admissions Experiment At The City University of New York (Lavin, Alba & Silberstein, 1981), which contains a detailed analysis of the first three open-admissions cohorts, and the cohort that would have been admitted before CUNY adopted the open-admissions policy. Because Lavin et al. cites the mean scores for educational background and academic performance outcomes of the 1970, 1971 and 1972 open-admissions cohort, this effort will combine and compute one mean score for each of the areas mentioned above. These combined mean scores will serve as the standard of comparison for this study.

Since, CUNY did not establish the Freshman Skills Assessment Examination program until the late 1970's, hence Right Versus Privilege contains, neither the pass/fail rate for these examinations nor the students' parental educational attainment. Therefore, this study uses Socioeconomic Origins and Educational Background of an Entering Class at CUNY (Lavin, Protash, Kramer, Bhouraskar, 1983), a two year longitudinal study of the 1980 Freshman Cohort at CUNY which does contain these data analyses.

Results

Table 1 reveals that the open-admissions cohort finished their first year of college with a 1.91 GPA and 16 earned credits. The data from the 1989 sample suggests that the mean GPA is 1.88 with 12 earned credits. By comparison, the Freshmen cohort which would have been admitted before the open-admissions policy (defined in this study as regular students) finished the first year of study with a 2.49 GPA and 25 earned credits.

The average number of academic courses taken in high school for the 1989 sample is 9.6, and 9.4 for the open-admissions community-college cohort, in comparison to 12 high school academic courses taken by the "regular" students.

Twenty-five percent of the open-admissions community-college cohort did not return for the second year. Twenty-four percent of the 1989 cohort did not return for the second year, in comparison to 22% for the "regular" cohort.

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place table 1 about here

Seventy-four percent of the open-admissions cohort, 75% of the "regular" cohort and 91% of the 1989 cohort stated that they were the first in their family to attend college.

Eighty percent of the 1989 sample, 43% of the open-admissions cohort and 40% of the "regular" cohort were either working or anticipating the need to work during the school year.

The mean family income of the "regular" cohort was $8,327;

the 1970 cohort reported $ 7,266, in comparison to the 1989 cohort who reported a mean family income of $12,300. These data suggest that the earning power of families of the 1989 sample has been seriously diminished, underscoring the need to work during the school year.

When asked to give two reasons for attending college, 75% of the open-admissions cohort responded, to earn more money and to get a better job, while 88% of the 1989 cohort responded in this manner (there were no data for the "regular" cohort).

Black and hispanic students enrolled at the community colleges for the first open-admissions cohort was 31%, while 67% of the 1989 Freshmen cohort responded that they were either black or hispanic.

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As mentioned earlier, since the City University did not institute a University-wide standardized testing system until several years after 1970, I will now turn to the 1980 cohort study to compare the standardized mean test scores of the CUNY Freshmen Skills Assessment, and to compare parental education in the two groups.

Table 3 reveals that 51% of the 1989 sample failed the CUNY reading examination during their first attempt at the examination, compared to 56% of the 1980 community-college cohort group; 54% of this sample failed the CUNY math examination

(during their first attempt), compared to 67% of 1980 cohort group and 64% of this sample failed the CUNY writing(during their first attempt) in comparison to 71% of the 1980 cohort.

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place table 3 about here

Forty-two percent of the respondents in the 1989 sample report that their mothers education as some high school or less, in comparison to 55% of the 1980 community college cohort. Twenty-five percent of the 1989 sample reported that their mothers had graduated from high school in comparison to 31% of the 1980 community-college cohort group and 28% of the mothers of the 1989 cohort had some or more of college, in comparison to 20% of the mothers of the 1980 community-college Freshmen cohort.

Thirty-four percent of the 1989 sample report their father's education as having some high school or less in comparison to 58% of the 1980 community- college cohort group; 27% of the 1989 sample reported that their fathers had graduated from high school, in comparison to 26% of the 1980 community-college cohort group. Twenty-two percent of the fathers of the 1989 cohort had some or more of college, in comparison to 25% of the 1980 cohort. Because of the large percentage (17%) that did not know their father's education, it is difficult to draw a comparative conclusion.

Forty-nine percent of the 1989 sample had/have sibling(s) enrolled in college, in comparison to 39% of the 1980 community-

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college cohort group.

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Discussion

This effort has attempted a multiple method approach in analyzing the historical comparison of two Freshmen cohorts divided by twenty years.

The data suggests that the education outcomes of the two groups are mutually consistent. Interestingly, the percentage of basic skill proficiency as tested by the CUNY assessment examination has risen over the last decade in all three tested areas for the 1989 cohort.

In summary, over the 20 years since the implementation of the open-admissions policy at CUNY at the Associates degree level, there has been a consistency of academic performance outcomes, although these data suggest a widening of the socio-economic chasm between the open-admissions cohort and the 1989 cohort.

Of the many limitations of this study, the sample size was small and confined to New York City Technical College. Expanding the sample to the other CUNY populations may result in an enhancement of the findings herein.

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Table 1

Freshman Cohort Open-admissions/1989

Educational Outcomes Comparisons

	regular	open	1989
	N=15,720		N=300
GPA	2.49	1.91	1.88
TOTALCRT	25	16	12
ACADEMUN	12	9.4	9.6
Return 2nd Year	78%	75%	76%

GPA= academic index after two semesters TOTALCRT= total credits earned over the two semesters, ACADMUN= high school academic units

Table 2

Freshmen Cohort Open-admissions-1989

Socio-economic Comparison

	regular	open	1989
	N=15,720		N=300
1st to attend college	75%	71%	91%
need to work	40%	43%	80%
family income	$8,327	$7,266	$12,300
enrolled in college for better job and to earn more money	–	75%	88%
% black & Hispanic	20%	31%	67%

Table 3

Freshmen Cohort 1980-1989 CUNY Assessment

Examination Comparison of First Attempt Non-proficiency

	1980 N=7,144	1989 N=300
Reading	56%	51%
Math	67%	54%
Writing	71%	64%

Table 4

Freshmen Cohort 1980-1989 Educational Attainment of Students' Family

	1980 N=7,144	1989 N=300
Mothers Education		
some high school or less	55%	42%
graduated high school	31%	25%
some college or more	20%	28%
don't know	-	5%
Fathers Education		
some high school or less	58%	34%
graduated high school	26%	27%
some college or more	25%	22%
don't know	-	17%
siblings attending/attended college	39%	49%